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A quick reference aid on U.S. foreign relations
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Bureau of Public Affairs • Department of State

Northern Ireland — May 1989

Background: The 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty resulted in partition of Ireland. Twenty-six counties in the south became the Irish Free State (now called Ireland); six of Ulster's nine counties remained within the UK as Northern Ireland with a home-rule government and control over most local matters. In the Irish Free State, a strong minority took up arms in opposition to the treaty. It was defeated during the civil war of 1922-23. In the following years, Northern Ireland's sizable Catholic minority was largely excluded from participating in the development of a pronouncedly Protestant state.

In 1968, Northern Ireland Catholics began a movement to seek equal treatment under law. The Northern Ireland Government was unsympathetic to their demands, and the overwhelmingly Protestant police did little to shield Catholic demonstrators from attack. In August 1969, the British Government sent troops to protect the Catholics. Amid worsening conditions, the moribund Irish Republican Army (IRA)--a small extremist remnant from Anglo-Irish war days--revived and pressed for Irish unity; its "Official" wing used Marxist political activism and its "Provisional" wing used armed violence to achieve their aims. As sectarian violence escalated, the two communities became ever more polarized. Judging matters to be out of control, the British Government ended local rule in March 1972 and began administering Northern Ireland directly through a Northern Ireland Secretary of State.

British policy: Since 1972, the British have made various attempts to return local government to Northern Ireland, on condition that arrangements be "widely acceptable" to both communities. At the December 1973 Sunningdale Conference, a power-sharing agreement was reached by the Unionists, favoring continued union with the UK, and Nationalists, favoring a united Irish nation. The UK and Irish Governments were parties to the agreement, which also established a Council of Ireland to handle unspecified matters of concern to both parts of the island. Following an election in which anti-Sunningdale Unionists won 11 out of 12 parliamentary seats, Protestant workers opposed to Sunningdale paralyzed Northern Ireland with a general strike in April 1974, and the power-sharing executive fell. After other unsuccessful initiatives, October 1982 saw elections for a Northern Ireland Assembly, to which, theoretically, powers could be delegated, but only if agreed by both communities. The Social Democratic Labor Party (SDLP) refused to participate in the assembly because there is no guaranteed provision for power-sharing or any institutional link with Ireland (the "Irish dimension").

The Irish factor: Irish political parties have generally followed the Nationalist lead of the SDLP in their commitment to peaceful unification, but their approaches have differed. In May 1983, the SDLP joined Ireland's three major political parties in participating in a "New Ireland Forum," convened by Ireland's then Prime Minister Garret FitzGerald to make recommendations on resolving the Irish

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question. Northern Unionist parties, plus the nonsectarian Alliance Party, refused to participate. In May 1984, the forum published an agreed "nationalist" position, reaffirming the aim of a united Ireland to be pursued only by democratic means and on the basis of agreement. It also condemned the use of terror by paramilitary organizations. In addition, the forum recommended the establishment of a unitary state, achieved by agreement and consent. It examined two other structural arrangements in some detail--a federal state and joint Dublin-London authority--and declared itself open to discuss other views that might contribute to political development.

Anglo-Irish relations: In 1985, Britain's Prime Minister Thatcher and Prime Minister FitzGerald signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement which gave Ireland a formal consultative role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. In accordance with the agreement, the UK and Irish Governments established an intergovernmental conference that deals with Northern Irish issues and relations between the two parts of the island. The great majority of Nationalists in Northern Ireland continue to support the agreement while the Unionist community continues to oppose it.

Outlook: Although terrorism still plagues Northern Ireland, we believe that the chances for peaceful solutions to Northern Ireland's problems are better than they have been in recent years. We see some indications that efforts by the UK and Irish Governments to promote economic development, equal opportunity, and reconciliation are bearing fruit and that Nationalists and Unionists may be more willing than in the past to work together for their common good.

US policy: The US supports the Anglo-Irish Agreement which states that "any change in the status of Northern Ireland should only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland." As tangible evidence of our commitment to peaceful solutions to Northern Ireland's problems, the US pledged $130 million to the International Fund for Ireland which seeks to promote economic development and reconciliation between Unionists and Nationalists. We support efforts by the UK to promote equal opportunity and to protect human rights in Northern Ireland. We oppose terrorism in all forms and from all quarters and urge all Americans to refuse support to those who seek to impose their views though terrorism. The US can play a supportive role in the search for solutions to Northern Ireland's problems; we realize, however, that it is the people of Ireland and the UK who must determine Ireland's future.